

MY HUSBAND WENT BLIND

Katherine Winder Wheeler

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# My Husband Went Blind

## *A Chapter of Personal History*

KATHERINE WINDERS WHEELER

WE were spinning up Fifth Avenue one glorious April morning a few years ago. The green trails into New England were calling us, a quaint old church in lower New York had just given us its blessing. There was wine in the air and spring in our hearts. The fragrance of my flowers, the glow of my ring, the happiness of being alone and together, the wonders that April morning had wrought!

Suddenly Howard edged over to the curb and stopped.

"Well, Absent Minded," I laughed. "Are you going to propose to me again?"

His eyes lowered and he smiled a little wryly.

"No, dear—I just thought if you don't mind, you'd better drive. It's the eyes. Acting up a bit today. Guess they're full of star dust."

"The eyes." His eyes! The trouble had started a year or so before. One specialist after another had been consulted. Diagnoses were vague and conflicting. The general advice had been to give them rest. Little wonder that they had wearied after years of newspaper work, ill-lighted offices, late hours, emotional strain. Now, all the doctors could do was advise rest. Relaxation. Get out in the country. May improve—can't tell.

With no alternative we had accepted it all. Of course the doctor's instructions would be followed minutely. We would get a place in the country—the home that had never quite materialized before, but just the sort of home we wanted anyway. Far from the din and clatter and rush; far from city rooms and editorial offices; an out-of-doors home where things would be cool and green and quiet, where there would be rest and healing.

Because Howard was unselfish and decent, there had been long hours of thrashing out the pros and cons of should we be married?

"How do you KNOW?" Howard would say, "How do you know these orbs aren't going to get worse, dear? Where would we be? What would we do?"

"I don't know how I know," I said, and it must have seemed a little silly, like a child trying to have its own way. "I—I just know!"

Then I had a sudden inspiration.

"Listen, Howard, please try to forget the gloomy 'ifs' and 'maybes' and let's think of it as an adven-

ture. There's nothing certain in the world anyway. All mishaps haven't an ominous prelude. If we were starting on a cruise in a little skiff in the South Seas we wouldn't say, 'but what if she breaks down?'—'what if we hit rock?'—'what if there's a storm?' If we thought of those things, well, we just wouldn't be adventurers. It's a challenge, and a promise. We'll make port, I tell you."

My argument was clinched. Howard could never refuse adventure.

Spring in New England fulfilled all her promises to us. There was a heavenly week of rehearsing for this life of peace and quietness that lay before us.

Our friends had crossed their fingers and wondered. Could we take it? Two more or less worldly people whose very bread had been excitement, who had lived life in a steadily increasing tempo. Action, adventure, impulsive plunging into things, reaping sometimes thrilling rewards, sometimes shattering disillusion, but off then to the next blue sky. Could we make this adjustment?

A month later we moved permanently to the country. I don't believe that a home, built of the frail stuff of dreams, ever emerged into wood and stone so perfectly. The country squire to whom the land grant had been given by the British Crown 150 years before, must have known he was carrying out the plan of a phantom architect drawn expressly for two people who wouldn't take occupancy for over a century. There were green wooded slopes to a lake, old vine matted walls, pegged oaken timbers, a granary and a carriage house, a marvelous garden from the rich soil of the old stable site. A secluded wing that once served as a flag paved milk house now became a quiet retreat for reading and writing.

These, with long walks through the woods, were our recreations. As typing became more and more difficult, I acted as scribe while Howard dictated. Here, too, was time and opportunity for reading we had always promised ourselves. There were, of course, hours when realities crowded in on us, but only occasional hours. The haunting fears of the sentence that had been suggested, if not pronounced, by men whose skill was unquestioned, naturally won an occasional round. But they never really spoiled the adventure. Life, we told our-



tion, of spiritual as well as material contribution to the Chinese women so horribly tried by misery. Admiration of the marvellous courage of Chinese mothers had to be given an outlet in action. The "Book of Hope" was conceived. This is to be a permanent record of the sympathy, respect and admiration of American women for their unfortunate sisters in China.

As a preliminary step, Pearl Buck sent a personal appeal to fifty of the most prominent women in America, asking them if they would contribute \$100 or more to this tribute to Chinese women, and forty-two of the fifty immediately promised their active participation. Eleanor Roosevelt opened the campaign officially by signing the "Book" and making the first contribution. Thereupon letters were sent to outstanding women in professional, social, literary and theatrical fields. Nation-wide appeals were made to the public through press and radio. News stories and editorials appeared in newspapers throughout the country. Begun only a few weeks ago, this handsome maroon hand-tooled leather book, fifteen inches by twelve, now contains the signatures of hundreds of outstanding American women. It has become the most famous book of autographs in the world. Each signature is an expression of sisterly good feeling and hope, as the gold letters "Book of Hope" on the cover signify. Each woman whose name is inscribed in the book has contributed \$100 or more towards the relief of Chinese women and children. The goal of the Committee is to secure the signatures of one thousand outstanding American women for the completed book.

The "Book of Hope" was recently placed on exhibition at Scribner's bookstore in New York as the "rarest autograph book in the world." And Lynn Fontanne, Dorothy Stickney and other celebrities turned the tables on autograph fans by taking autographs themselves for the "Book."

But American children, as well as American women, have their place in this great gesture of sympathy and help to the unfortunate. In nine days of April of this year, after a three-month educational campaign to help our children realize their good fortune in being born in a great and peaceful Federation, an organization named the Children's Crusade for Children collected \$135,000 in voluntary contributions from school children of America. Every effort was made by the Children's Crusade to avoid anything like the traditional "drive." The idea was presented to the children as an opportunity for them to help other children, victims of war and persecution, and as a voluntary expression of their thankfulness for being Americans. Hence the money represents a free-will offering from the generous hearts of American children.

A jury of award, which included Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, William Allen White, Justice Irving Lehman and others, voted to apportion \$22,500 from the money collected by the Children's Crusade for help to Chinese children. In July, a check for this amount was presented to Pearl Buck's Committee. The money will be used exclusively for Chinese children. Medical supplies purchased with these funds will carry with them a label reading: "Given in brotherly sympathy to Chinese children by American boys and girls."

As this article is written, the Women's Committee of Tribute to China has passed the halfway mark in its campaign and collected more than \$65,000 toward its \$100,000 quota. The completed "Book of Hope" and assurances of continued shipment of medical supplies will be formally presented to the Chinese Ambassador to the United States, Dr. Hu Shih, on September 26th. Dr. Hu Shih will then forward the "Book" to Mme. Chiang Kai-Shek, who will accept it on behalf of her countrymen.

BECAUSE of the urgency of China's needs, as soon as contributions are received at Committee headquarters they are used to purchase medical supplies which are sent at once to China. Until recently the only known medical aid for relieving malignant malaria was quinine, but the funds from the Women's Committee of Tribute to China have made it possible for the Bureau to purchase 400,000 doses of a new drug—abatrane—which is much more effective in the treatment of the disease. On the steamship *Explorer* which sailed recently, there were fifty forty-quart autoclaves sterilizers for surgical equipment, also purchased with Committee funds, which, because of the frequent bombings, are so essential for use in emergency operations and at temporary relief stations.

The way in which these supplies reach China is interesting. The Committee has been given official assurance that the Burma Road will remain open to medical supplies of all kinds. However, since time now plays an important role in China's history, many of the supplies are being shipped by plane from Manila to Kweiyang, which is in Chinese territory, under Chinese rule. From there they can be safely sent throughout the Chinese Republic to suffering women and children. It is a treasure to the heart to know that, come what may in the future, American school children and American women have lived up to the best of our American tradition of giving help to the innocent in distress.

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*Checks for the Book of Hope fund, which may be for any amount, should be sent to Pearl S. Buck, the Women's Committee of Tribute to China, 401 Graybar Building, New York, N. Y.*



selves, was too complete, too perfect, the eternal rightness of things had been made so apparent to this point that somehow the thought of things going suddenly in reverse just didn't seem feasible.

My part, of course, was only a small one in the supporting cast. Howard had the burden of the star. I marveled at him. Everyone did. It was one thing for me to keep happy and hopeful, and quite another for him. Getting blinder by the week, his zest for life and people and things remained unchallenged. He gained a new poise, a poise with no trace of resignation, that added immeasurably to his attractiveness. People attributed it to some sort of will power or self-control, but in other years these had been tried and found wanting.

"It isn't that I've set myself against worry, Kay," he said one day. "I worry like sin over our damned cucumbers. But this eye business—it's just as if I had an arm in a sling, pretty inconvenient at times but nothing fatal or permanent about it."

I often wondered what Howard would have done without this conviction to fall back on. Some of the handicaps he endured were harrowing. The worst, I believe, were the hazards he encountered in eating. By the time a fork reached his mouth, the food would nearly always have fallen off on the way up. Tumblers and cups toppled over and food slid off plates during attempts to stab it with a fork. We had to do away with candle-light and use 80 watt lamp bulbs. Sometimes the arduous task of eating was too much for him and he would have to leave the table with his food untouched.

I became quite a proficient barber that summer. The effort of feeling his way in and out of strange barber shops seemed an unnecessary burden. So we got a set of barber's tools and after two or three rather botchy jobs, I got so I could produce what might be called a passable haircut.

We had several "callers" from the little nearby village, one of those rare spots where the neighborly spirit had survived. Their solicitations were sincere and often impassioned. Somehow, neither of us could rise to these occasions. They assured us the Lord had a purpose in sending affliction and that we would be given strength according to our needs. We appreciated their kindness and their sincerity but their logic failed to satisfy.

Of course we were given strength, strength and vision, not to crouch brokenly under affliction but to look up, beyond, ahead. Vision that needed no eyes to see that the dark intervals, often long and confusing, could be like corridors that led only through darkness and not into it.

Then, there were our "practical" friends. Of course, being friends, they were glad to see that Howard had come to what they considered some

sort of home-brewed philosophy that apparently made his plight more endurable. But I was the object of their protests. What were my plans? Didn't I realize the situation I was going to be forced to face? I must be ready for it. It was a thing that required steeling myself to a facing of facts. There was the financial element to think of, etc., etc., etc.

What they said seemed reasonable enough and I honestly tried to consider all these angles seriously. Maybe I was being remiss in not coming down to earth about it all. So I tried to picture a



day when we would be destitute, when the responsibility of maintaining ourselves would rest on my inexperienced shoulders. And I tried to think what, under these circumstances, I would, or could, do. I couldn't even bring up a convincing picture of such a situation. It seemed fantastic and impossible. It was as if I had tried to imagine what I would do in the event of an air raid or of encountering a leper at the front door. A little demon seemed to nudge me and wink slyly as if to say, "It isn't going to happen, so why fret yourself?" So I suppose I was put down as a sort of irresponsible Gipsy headed for a sad end when I was merely the victim, or rather, the beneficiary of my unaccountable convictions.

The summer passed and with it the last flickering light. Howard awakened one morning to find that a hazy glow he had been able to detect from the sun had completely faded. Although this left him actually no worse off than he had been, there was something psychologically bad in it. It had been sort of a case of where there's light, there's hope. And now there was no light. There followed a few days when the old spirit of adventure seemed to suffer a severe blow. Then one morning he said,

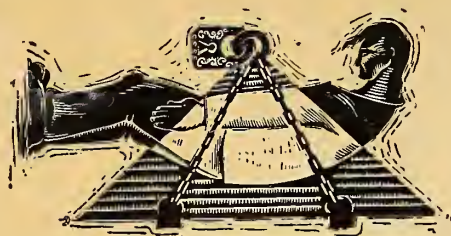
"Well, Kay, I've hit bottom, all right, but sometimes it takes that before you can start back up.



Do you still feel that it's—just a phase?"

"I do," I said emphatically. "It's seemed almost heartless since that morning to go on being untroubled about it. I was afraid you mightn't understand. But deep down inside I'm just as sure as I ever was. It's been a tough voyage but we're in sight of land and I DO mean sight!"

"Look at me and say that again, darling." He seemed half credulous and half amused. I leaned over him and looked down into his sightless eyes



which until that moment had seemed as clear and strong as the most normal.

"Howard," I exclaimed, "There is a bluish tinge over the pupils. A sort of veily film."

"What!"

"Yes—yes there is. I've never noticed it before. Milky, it is."

Howard sat upright. He was excited, tense. He looked straight ahead as if trying to see something.

"Do you suppose—but it can't be—the doctors would have known. It—it can't be cataract."

"But darling, it CAN be! Cataracts! And they can take them off. I know it!"

I was on my knees at his feet, behaving very childishly. He ran his hand over my wet face and rested it on my hair.

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If I ever come forth from the grave, which isn't likely, it can't be a greater thrill than I felt the morning the bandages were taken from Howard's eyes.

The doctors and nurses were gliding complacently about as if nothing in particular were happening. In their starched, efficient remoteness they couldn't hear the planets banging together and feel the very earth tremble under their feet.

"He'll see, won't he? Of course he will. He'll see." I jabbered.

"We hope so," one of the crisp, paper doll nurses said, eyeing me indulgently.

Hope so! What did they mean, hope so! The moon and the sun and the stars were shouting the Hallelujah chorus, and they say they hope so!

"Easy now." It was the doctor speaking. "Better draw the blinds a little, we don't want too much light at first. All right. They may open a little hard—muscles have to limber up a bit."

I froze in my tracks and my tongue clung to the

roof of my mouth as I watched Howard's eyes slowly open. Neither of us could speak but I knew when he took my hand that we had reached port.

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The Victorian poets, if I remember rightly, at the end of a lengthy sonnet or ballad often added a few lines after the words, "l'envoi," which, though never quite clear, seemed an attempt to elucidate or clarify something, or, worse still, to point a moral. And here I find the temptation to do just that, not to moralize, Heaven forbid, but to offer some small answer to a possible, "so what?"

Our experience in itself, important as it is in our lives, is by no means the extent or the boundary of what we discovered during that period.

In the happy confusion of the months that followed we did little analyzing of the experience we had come through. We were ready to agree with our friends that it had been a "lucky break"—that it was just one of those things in life that brought its own right answer, and there we stopped.

As the months passed we inevitably went on to new adjustments and new problems. Having eyes again and living, more or less, like other people, soon became the norm. Nevertheless, the adventure-approach had become, to some extent, a habit and we found ourselves riding over difficulties with often amazing results. I don't mean to say that whatever we decided was desirable was always forthcoming or that things always came about as we anticipated, but I can say that the outcomes have always been good, good to the extent of our ability to expect it. The repeated "panning out" of things made it impossible to think of them as coincidental or to dismiss them with a casual "it would have happened anyway."

It is hard to speak of things that lie outside the realm of the strictly tangible without hinting at mysticism, superstition or just plain fanaticism. So far I have not subscribed to any of the current canned philosophies or religions. I don't believe in concentration, vibration or hypnosis as holding the answer to anything. I don't believe that any psychological tricks can win friends or influence people. I don't believe that life begins at forty or ends with organic exhaustion. I don't believe that the chanting of "day by day in every way, etc." will make me any better nor that the lines in my hand, the stars in the sky nor the shape of my head determines my destiny. In fact, what I do believe is so simple and unprofound that there is little chance of it ever being dignified by an *ism* or *ology* suffix.

I do believe, briefly, that there is a happy, a right answer to everything and that it is bound to be-

come apparent if we really insist upon it. Aside from being simple, this theory, for want of a better word, is also highly unoriginal. Marcus Aurelius in his classic heyday declared, "Take away the complaint, 'I have been harmed,' and the harm is taken away." Tennyson advises cleaving to the "sunnier side of doubt." A noted contemporary writer whose sanity has never been questioned says, "It is in the province of the intelligent

man or woman to take hold of the wheel, so to speak, and to determine as an intelligent human being should, what condition or conditions shall be given birth and form. . . ." On the air waves the other evening I was amazed to hear that a prominent physicist, as the result of some enlivening research, had concluded that war comes about as the result of the constant contemplation of it.

A guest met halfway is apt to be entertained.

## Are the Railroads Obsolete?

Far from it, says this authority, calling them essential to national welfare and security

F. E. WILLIAMSON

*President of the New York Central Railroad*

WHEN business collapsed in 1929, industrial production declined and railroad traffic volume drifted to low ebb. This was only natural. Railroads depend upon agriculture and industry for tonnage. Trade and commerce need transportation only when their products are moving to markets. When they are not moving, railroad carloadings fall off and railroad earnings decline. This is always true during periods of business recession and it was true particularly in the recent years when we were passing through a business depression which was world wide, and which was without a parallel in history.

However, the railroad situation has been aggravated by the rapid development of other forms of transportation. Some of this transport service enjoys government subsidy in greater or lesser degree. Some of it operates relatively free of governmental supervision and regulation as it is applied to the railroads. As a result, the transportation field is deluged with unfair and wasteful competition. It is unfair because government continues to favor some transport agencies over others. It is wasteful because we have developed more transport facilities than the country needs.

This being true, we are again engaged in a nation-wide discussion of transportation generally and the railroads in particular. We recognize the need for a sound and constructive national policy that will give the country the kind of transport service it needs at the lowest permissible cost, and that will create a fair field for all transport agencies.

During this discussion we have heard much about the surplus plant and facilities of the railroads. But we have heard little about the surplus facilities of other forms of transport. In fact, we continue to add to this surplus. If private capital is not available, we endeavor to have government use public funds for the creation of more transportation service. This is true particularly of inland waterways and canals—a transport service which relatively few demand and which no one really needs.

Nevertheless, the discussion centers upon the alleged surplus of railroad plants. We talk about the duplication of facilities and service and the need for their elimination. There are those who think that a substantial portion of the railroad facilities in this country should be junked. There are others who even suggest that the railroads are obsolete, that they are through, that they are on the way out. An intelligent approach to this subject discloses some interesting and illuminating facts.

That all forms of transportation have a place in our system of distribution is freely conceded. That we should use each transportation agency in the field where it can do the best job at the lowest real cost, is just plain common sense. But the fact remains that we depend upon the railroads for the movement of the great bulk of our traffic. This has been true in the past, it is true today, and it will be true in the future.

This fact becomes apparent when we realize that the railroads constitute the only transport



agency which is equipped to handle all classes of traffic from here to there and everywhere else, and in all kinds of weather. Airships may not be able to leave the ground, highways may be impassable, rivers and canals may be frozen; but we expect the railroads to take care of our traffic needs—and they do. On the average, railroads load about four thousand cars of freight every hour of the day; 50,000 persons board their passenger trains every hour; and more than 30,000 travelers use sleeping cars every night. Surely this is not an indication of obsolescence.

**N**OR has the quality of rail service deteriorated. On the contrary, the rail carriers are providing the best service in the history of the industry. Higher speed with greater safety and more comforts for travelers mark the passenger trains of today. Freight traffic moves faster and on dependable schedules. Overnight freight service has been expanded to cover most important centers within a radius of five hundred miles. Over the past twenty years the quality of the service has steadily improved, while the cost of the service has been generally declining. The railroad dollar now buys more service and better service than ever before.

Furthermore, the railroads continue to make an important contribution to the national welfare through the disbursement of huge sums for wages and enormous expenditures for equipment, materials and supplies. Wages aggregating nearly two billions of dollars annually and another billion annually for equipment, materials and supplies are spread over the entire land. These huge disbursements help to keep mills and factories running, and to make communities prosperous.

The railroad industry also holds its place in the front ranks of the nation's largest taxpayers. The railroad tax bill now totals more than a million dollars daily. A substantial portion of railroad taxes goes to the support of state and local governments. More than one hundred million dollars annually of railroad taxes go into school funds.

Of course, it is possible that those who speak of obsolescence may have in mind branch lines of railroads. Many of these short lines were built originally for a particular purpose—to reach mineral deposits, areas of timber, or the like—resources which have been exhausted long ago. But over the years communities have grown up along these branch lines and these communities need schools, good highways and other services usually provided by local government. Taxes paid by these branch

lines provide a substantial portion of the money needed to maintain these services. In fact, some local governments depend almost entirely upon these branch line taxes.

In most cases the branch lines have been paralleled by improved highways. There is now little or no tonnage for the railroads, and the branch lines could be abandoned. However, there is always sturdy resistance to the abandonment of even the branch line railroads. Sparsely settled communities do not want to lose an important contribution to the local tax chest. Moreover, the residents of these outlying communities like to know that the railroad is still there and that they can use it—when the highways are impassable.

**T**HE question of obsolescence is sometimes coupled with the statement that the railroads are not progressive and that they are living in a past age. Nothing could be further from the truth. As a matter of fact, there has been continuous progress since the first railroad was built more than a hundred years ago, and there has been unusual progress in railroading in the past few decades. If this were not true, we would not have the railroad service we enjoy today.

For instance, one of the oldest of the pioneer railroads was the Mohawk and Hudson—the first railroad operated in the state of New York. It was seventeen miles long and was opened for passenger traffic between Albany and Schenectady in 1831. Today it stands as the cornerstone of the New York Central System, which serves eleven states and two provinces of Canada with about 11,100 miles of line and almost 26,000 miles of trackage. The New York Central System, as it is today, embraces about five hundred and sixty predecessor companies of which the Mohawk and Hudson was the first. Many of these pioneer railroad units merely followed natural channels as they sought the protecting arm of a strong railroad system, where they found the opportunity to be of greater service and to expand their traffic areas. These smaller lines could not have survived otherwise.

The growth of the New York Central is typical of the development and expansion of railway service in this country—a development which promoted the flow of trade and commerce and which enlarged the opportunities for marketing the products of agriculture and industry. This spelled progress not only for the railroads but for the nation as well.





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